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London, January 8 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom is making preparations in case London is overwhelmed by COVID-19 infections, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said on Thursday, amid reports hospitals in the capital could be inundated with patients within two weeks.

Projections leaked to leading medical publication the Health Service Journal (HSJ), published on Wednesday, showed that even if the number of COVID-19 patients increased at the lowest rate

considered likely, London hospitals would be short of nearly 2,000 acute and intensive beds by January 19th.

Asked about the estimates, Hancock said he was concerned about the pressures on the National Health Service (NHS) but claimed the government was putting extra resources into areas under the most significant strain. Hancock told broadcasters a field hospital set up in east London's ExCeL convention centre was on standby and ready to relieve pressure on the NHS if required.

"We're putting in the extra resources to make sure that the NHS gets the support it needs in the parts of the country where it's under the most significant pressure," he said.

"For instance in London, (we are) making sure that the Nightingale hospital is on standby and there if needed. And if it is needed, of course, then it will be used." The Nightingale hospital was originally set up for COVID-19 critical care, but only 51 patients were treated there before it was mothballed in May.

The British Medical Journal reported it was being repurposed to take non-COVID patients recovering from operations and procedures, in order to relieve the unprecedented demand for beds elsewhere.

On Wednesday, the daily number of deaths from COVID-19 across the UK surpassed 1,000 for the first time since April. The country's total COVID-19 death toll since the start of the pandemic is more than 77,300, among the highest in Europe.

London and southeast England have been the areas worst hit by the new variant of the virus, which is driving the spiralling caseload.

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